ON PRAYER

3. PRAISING AND THANKING

November 24, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
I Thessalonians 5:12-18
Luke 17:11-19

"pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances..."
-I Thessalonians 5:17-18 (NRSV)

If you are like most people these days, you believe that praying is a good idea but don't do much of it. If you are like most church-goers these days, it would be a bit of a generous exaggeration to call what praying you do a "prayer life."

If what praying you actually do, other than the prayers you say in church, is an occasional word, mostly on the run, you are normal. That's the way it is for most of us. Maybe that's not how it should be, and maybe someday you and I will change, but for now what praying we do is pretty limited.

Now I don't have it on any authority but my own faith and experience, and on that modest basis I would suggest that God doesn't hold that against you. God maybe even understands how the life you try to live is already claiming your mental energy before your alarm clock goes off; that you may even be working while you are showering or shaving; that you give yourself so totally to your job and your friends and your commitment, that the first solitary and quiet - and therefore prayerful - moment of your day is often the last moment before your eyes close in sleep. I believe God understands that and while wishing to hear more from you - wishing for more of a conversational relationship with you - does understand you; and like a parent is a little sad that what you are missing by not praying is important to you.

If you see any of yourself in that description, there is something you can do about it besides feel guilty. There is a good place to begin without signing up for a forty-eight-hour prayer retreat. It is rudimentary. Say "thank you." As your mind skips into gear while you shower or shave, say "thank you." As you slip into blessed sleep, say "thank you." It's not much... But it just may be enough.

We've been thinking about prayer and I have suggested that to pray requires:

- A strong sense of your own worth as a child of God, not simply a depraved sinner, but one God loves as if there were only one of you to love.

-And I proposed that to pray you must be willing to bring to God the content of your heart and to ask God to meet your needs.

-And I proposed, that in order to pray, you must be willing to start the conversation, to insist on a hearing, and sometimes to express impatience.

-And this morning, my proposal is that the way to begin and to end your praying, in fact the words to say, if you cannot or will not pray any other words, are these... "Thank you."

We seem to know to teach it to the children. We teach them to "say grace" early on. People who don't pray themselves, don't think much about it, teach their children to say table grace. It seems that we know intuitively the importance of gratitude. Often we ask the youngest to do the table praying for us. It's a moment to shine. It's also a moment of high theological integrity when the three-year-old says:

"God is great
God is good.
Let us thank God for this food."

And sometimes there are moments of high humor.

My younger brother and I used to think it was hilarious when an eighty-five-year-old great uncle made it rhyme by praying:

"God is good
Let us thank him for this food."

And when the scout leader or camp counselor asks someone to say grace, someone invariably says, "Grace," or worse yet, "Here's the bread. Here's the meat. Good God, let's eat." And if you ever see me chuckling as someone's table grace goes on too long, it's because I'm remembering sitting at a long table at summer camp, holding in my lap the trough we made out of the plastic table cloth, into which the boy at the end was pouring ice water, which was overflowing into the lap of the boy at the other end, as the Rev. Robert Fulton's table grace droned on and on.

We teach children to say thank you because we know intuitively that gratitude is somehow basic to our humanness.

From the giver's side of it, the act of giving is incomplete until the gift is received and in some sense acknowledged. Of course, you don't give a gift to be thanked; but if you are not, you are never sure that the gift arrived, never sure that it was appreciated, never sure, that is to say, that your love - or whatever it was that motivated you to give the gift - meant anything at all to the recipient. How foolish we feel and how diminished the act of giving is when we have to ask, "Did you receive my gift?"

We know that gratitude is part of the dynamic of giving and receiving - that it is basic to the relationship between giver and recipient: and further, we know that saying thank you is somehow connected to our own spiritual health.

It was C. S. Lewis who observed that God asks for a lot of praise and gratitude in the Bible. At first reading, it appears a little petty, frankly, like the dictator who needs a claque of people around to tell him how wonderful he is.

But then Lewis, who was writing an essay about the Psalms, observed that if we fail to admire great art, for instance, we have missed something. The art isn't poorer for our refusal to admire it, but we may be.

He observed that healthy, modest and happy people did a lot of praising - praising of each other, the world, music, food and that cranky, unhappy people didn't praise anything.

So, Lewis, with his child-like approach to these weighty matters, came to a logical conclusion: praising and thanking will make you healthy and happy. "Praise," he wrote, "almost seems to be inner health made audible." [Reflections on the Psalms, p. 80]

That's why the Bible insists that we do so much praising and thanking and it is also the point of the story in the Gospel of Luke about the ten Lepers, a favorite Thanksgiving text.

It seems at first to be a simple example of ingratitude. Ten men were healed. Nine didn't say thank you. Those nine have been treated very roughly over the years in countless Thanksgiving sermons as examples of human boorishness and ingratitude. But there is more going on than is immediately apparent in Luke's simple story.

What we know about people with leprosy is that they were isolated from society because of fear. When they contracted the dread disease, they were forced to leave their families and remove themselves from the community. There were no hospitals, halfway houses, so they banded together in small groups of iso-

lated despair. They got by begging for money. More often than not they died of hunger, exposure, or the inevitable madness their terrible isolation produced.

So when a band of men who had leprosy saw Jesus and his friends, standing at prescribed distance, they cried, "Jesus have mercy." Very much like the blind man who insisted on a hearing, these pathetic characters are not about to miss a chance with Jesus.

What they get from him is peculiar. Jesus tells the men to go see a priest, the person society assigned the responsibility of diagnosing leprosy. Off they go and on the way, lo and behold, their leprosy disappears.

One of the men returns to Jesus, falls on his face and thanks him. And Jesus says, "Rise, your faith has made you well." How about the other nine? Go easy on them. Maybe they are already home, hugging their families, holding in their arms the dear ones, the babies, they have not touched in years. They are not the point of this story.

"Your faith has made you well," he said to the one who expressed gratitude. All ten are healed. "You are well. You are healthy. You are whole because you have expressed gratitude." So the point apparently is that you are not whole, regardless of physical health, what you own, who you are, until you experience and express gratitude.

Dr. Herbert Benson at Harvard Medical School says that gratitude is a great reducer of stress.

Dutch priest, Henri Nouwen, observes that fear and anxiety diminish as we experience gratitude for the gift of life.

Living in South America for a while, Nouwen wrote in his journal:

> "Thanksgiving Day! There is probably no day I like so much in the United States as this day. In many ways it struck me as a more spiritual or religious day than Christmas: no gifts, few commercial preparations, just a coming together to express gratitude for life and for all the blessings we have received. I am more and more convinced that gratitude is one of the most sublime of human emotions." [Gracias!, p. 55]

You cannot, of course, force someone to feel anything. You cannot coerce your own feelings. You can say "thank you," and that will open you to the experience of gratitude, but you can't make yourself feel it. What you can do is open your eyes.

What the season of Thanksgiving can do for all of us is invite us to lift our heads from the book, desk, computer, ledger, brief, account, hurried, harried intensity of urban life, and look around.

In his personal memoir, Self-Consciousness, John Updike wrote about his Unitarian minister father-in-law who always exclaimed while driving, "What a view!" about countryside no one else seemed to appreciate:

> "Like my late Unitarian father-in-law, am I now in my amazed, insistent appreciation of the physical world, of this planet with its scenery and weather - that pathetic discovery which the old make that every day and every season has its beauty and its uses, that even a walk to the mailbox is a precious experience, that all species of tree and weed have their signature and style and the sky is a pageant of clouds. Aging calls us outdoors, after the adult indoors of work and love-life and keeping stylish into the lowly simplicities we thought we had outgrown as children. We come again to love the plain world, stones and wood, air and water. The act of seeing itself is glorious and of hearing and feeling and tasting." [p. 246]

Similarly, the late Archibald MacLeish:

> "At twenty, stooping round about, I thought the world a miserable place, truth a trick, faith in doubt, little beauty, less grace. Now at sixty what I see, although the world is worse by far, stops my heart in ecstasy, God, the wonders that 'there are.'"

Pick up your head, open your eyes. Lift up your heart and give thanks.

Frank Harrington, pastor of the Peach Tree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, told a group of clergy a story in a meeting last week. It's about an old man, who every Friday in the early evening, walked from his house down to the ocean, carrying a bucket of shrimp. And as the sun started its descent and the evening waves gently lapped the shore, walked to the end of the pier and reached in his bucket of shrimp and began to feed the birds who were already there waiting for him. Slowly, intentionally, he distributed the contents of his bucket, as he did every Friday evening, with the sun slipping down over the horizon.

What was he doing there? He was saying thank you.

His name was Captain Eddie Rickenbacker. Years before, October 1942, President Roosevelt dispatched Captain Rickenbaker with a special message to General MacArthur who was beginning to plan American strategy in the Pacific War. But the B-17 became lost, ran out of fuel and went down. The crew of eight made it into life boats and then began a harrowing, long and desperate fight to survive the sun, sharks, waves, but most of all hunger.

When it seemed that the end had come and there was no hope, when they had prayed all they could pray, Captain Rickenbaker, in the raft, was asleep with his cap over his eyes. He felt something. A bird had lighted on his head. He knew if he could catch it, they would survive. He did. And they ate it. They used its entrails for bait. They survived.

And so the old captain, now hunched over, but still proud, every Friday of his life, took his bucket of shrimp and fed the birds and said, "thank you."

Frank asked: "What was that sea gull doing there hundreds of miles from land?" And wisely did not try to answer. Only God knows.

But this we believe. God knows you are here. God knows you are you. God knows your needs.

Your life is a gift.
Two people loved you into life.
A mother cradled you and fed you.
Dear ones bathed and dressed and
taught and nurtured you...long ago
your life was given to you.

And God's precious world, a gift which has fed and sheltered you, and filled your heart with its beauty.

And God's gift of love given new each morning... Others who cherish you, one perhaps, you love with a love you cannot describe, apart from your gratitude for it.

And mystery of all mystery, perhaps one who loves you in return.

And the children...

This we believe - all of it is a gift.

And the giver has come personally, descended to live and love and die with us and for us, in an ultimate gift of eternal love.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow" - is how we begin every Sunday.

"Now thank we all our God" is how we end.

May it be the way we begin and end this and all our days.

And if it is the only prayer you pray, it will be sufficient.

Thank you. Thank you, God. Amen.